

Victimless Crimes?

The past week in Louisiana and Mississippi tested the strength of human will – even more so than the 9/11 did in America.

Shortly after 9/11, all America and even all the world came together. Curiously there was no looting at all in lower Manhattan, where such could have been easily predictable. Four years ago I was wondering when Manhattan would turn into an orgy of looting and riot, but nothing like that ever happened even in the midst of the devastation and confusion. People were all in for it together, under the red, blue and white, singing “God bless America” and “America the Beautiful.”

In a stark contrast, this past week, despite the size of devastation, the U.S. government was slow in delivering aids, and there were reports of murder, rape and looting throughout the hurricane disaster area.

In a terrorist attack, politicians can easily point their fingers at the ultimate ‘other’ – four years ago, our leaders quickly blamed the Muslims and foreign students from Arab nations. In a natural disaster, however, we cannot just simply declare a ‘war on God.’ In a situation such as the past week’s, more than in anything else, we see our human nature in a highly epitomised way.

In a confusion of the aftermath and where ‘hope’ is limited strictly for whether one can obtain another gallon of water, next sea ration, or even whether one can survive for another 24 hours, an atmosphere of fatalism – an atmosphere of ‘anything goes’ – easily tempts us to do things we would normally never think of doing.

Rape runs rampant among those who are shut inside a hotel.

Murder and fight break out over food and shelter.

Trivial quarrels turn into riots.

Through broken walls of shops one runs away with both essential survival items and valuables.

Fear begets more fear. Fear of natural disaster turns into fear of human-made disasters.

Eventually people distrust each other and begin dehumanizing the other.

Hence the drama of survival continues.

In other parts of the country, people are less eager to help the victims of the hurricane Katrina than to help the ‘fallen’ of the 9/11. Some people harbour a deep-seated racism and classism, thinking that it is God’s judgement against the poor and blacks that these predominantly poor and black towns of New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Biloxi, Mississippi were hit. A certain ‘Baptist’ preacher from Kansas is already rejoicing over another ‘God’s judgement’ upon the city famous for its Mardi Gras and Voodooism. Some ‘patriotic’ Americans cannot feel the same kind of sympathy they had after 9/11 because there were no nationalistic symbols destroyed and there was no enemy to fight.

In today’s lectionary passage, we read the Great Commandment – the most succinct summation of the moral and ethical precepts found in the Holy Scriptures, and indeed in almost all other religious traditions in the world:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who



St. Brigid
Celtic Anabaptist
Community
of Central Portland
*Yr Eglwys
Ailfedyddwyr Celtaidd
Santaffraid,
Portland Canolog*

www.stbrigidcac.co.nr
stbrigidcac@gmail.com

The Most Rev. Michael Wrenn,
archbishop
The Rev. Sr. Sarah-Andrea Morrigan,
rector

*An affiliated congregation of the
Celtic Anabaptist Communion
(Charleston, Mississippi)*

*An associated ministry of
Trinity Evangelical Christian Ministries
(Toney, Alabama)*

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*By Sarah-Andrea Morrigan
sarah@sam.multnomah.or.us*

*Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20*

page 1

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loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments...are summed up in this word, 'love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13:8-10)

And how hard it is to fulfil this law!

It is often said that a true test of one's character is what one does when no one is watching, when one can easily get away with anything, when there is no accountability required, and when "everyone else is doing it." It was difficult for some American soldiers to stand up for what is right and blow whistles when "everyone else" is torturing Iraqi insurgents and having a grand fun time doing it in a top-secret military prison. It was difficult to preach against fascism and rescue the persecuted Jews during Hitler's Third Reich. And it is difficult and challenging – and also not quite rewarding when doing what is right does not always mean publicity or a presidential medal – to stop the flow of evil and do what is good, right and loving in the middle of this hurricane disaster.

Wars and disasters bring the extreme examples of human faults.

But these are not the only time where we have problems with all this. In fact, most of such moral decisions are made in a peaceful, day-to-day setting. And interpersonal conflicts also occur in a seemingly peaceful, functional and idyllic context also.

In the other reading, from the Gospel of Matthew, we find the classic method of conflict resolution. Today this style of resolving conflicts and rectifying 'wrongs' is called mediation, arbitration or 'alternative dispute resolution' (ADR). Many businesses use ADR as a lower-cost alternative to litigation today, but they drew the methodology and concepts from our Anabaptist heritage – particularly from the Quakers.

In contrast to the first century Jewish religious structure and the Imperial Roman jurisprudence, the Church adopted a judicial method that was highly personalist, decentralised and grass-roots. There was no need for a courthouse, a judge or even politicians to make laws. All what they needed were two parties of the dispute, one or two neutral person(s) from the community, and if –and only if– the conflict was not resolved between themselves, the case is taken to the public in the community at large.

This creates a more equitable, participatory and less authoritarian way to create peace and justice than in a heavy-handed and litigious 'justice' system of modern-day Western world. And this works even when a massive disaster destroys the infrastructure and cripples the government. Yet, this system only works when everyone is unanimously on the same page with the principles of what is right. Hence Christian justice is based on one foundation: love for one another. The traditional society is a unanimous society – in which there was a certain minimal set of values that was commonly shared and agreed upon without any political manoeuvring. And this is why the Great Commandment of love was found commonly in Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and even in most pagan religions.

There really is no peace without the law of love. Otherwise a 'peace' must be constantly maintained through violence and force – as in Pax Romana and Pax Americana. But such 'peace' is easily broken once the force and violence that maintained the so-called 'peace' becomes powerless, as was the case in New Orleans past week.

"The one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8.)



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*By Sarah-Andrea Morrigan
sarah@sam.multnomah.or.us*

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page 2

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